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Immigrant Postsecondary Education: A Comparison of Canada and Switzerland

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.	not available for any reference period
..	not available for a specific reference period
...	not applicable
0	true zero or a value rounded to zero
0^s	value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
^{p}	preliminary
^{r}	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
^{E}	use with caution
F	too unreliable to be published
*	significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

Immigrant Postsecondary Education: A Comparison of Canada and Switzerland

by Garnett Picot and Feng Hou

This article in the *Economic Insights* series examines differences in postsecondary-participation rates between students with and without immigrant backgrounds in Canada and Switzerland. The comparison, which is based on comparable data from the two countries, highlights general patterns of educational outcomes among immigrant youth in North America and Europe. It is based on the working paper *Immigrant Status, Early Skill Development, and Postsecondary Participation: A Comparison of Canada and Switzerland*.

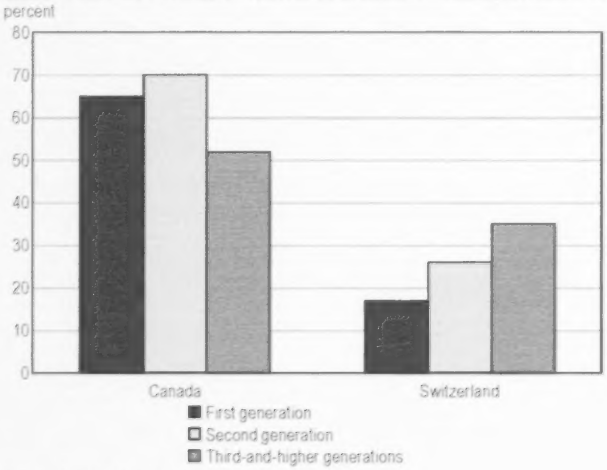
In 2000, the first wave of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was fielded by the OECD.[1] The 2000 PISA assessed reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy among 15-year-olds, with an emphasis on reading literacy. It also collected information on social, cultural, economic, and educational factors believed to be associated with student performance. Subsequently, both Canada and Switzerland surveyed PISA participants on a regular basis until they were aged 23, making it possible to relate characteristics observed at earlier ages, such as PISA scores and educational aspirations, to outcomes at older ages, such as postsecondary enrolment.

In Canada, students with immigrant parents were much more likely to participate in postsecondary education than students with native-born parents. In Switzerland, the opposite was the case.

The basic features of the immigration and education systems in Canada and Switzerland are important contextual considerations in this regard. Canada's immigration system largely focuses on educated and skilled immigrants, and as a result educational attainment is higher, on average, among immigrants than among the Canadian-born population. In contrast, the Swiss immigration system has traditionally brought in lower-skilled immigrants, although this has been changing in recent years. Differences in immigration systems are reflected in the socioeconomic backgrounds of immigrant youth. For example, in Canada, 49% of first-generation youth in the study—that is, individuals who immigrated before age 15—had two parents with postsecondary credentials, compared to 17% in Switzerland.

The Canadian and Swiss education systems are also very different. The Swiss system is characterized by distinct academic streams into which students are sorted. This affects postsecondary attendance, as only 3% of students from the "basic" academic track entered postsecondary education by age 23, compared with 30% of those from the upper-level track. Immigrant students find themselves disproportionately in the basic track. However, Swiss students have access to strong vocational training at

Chart 1
Percent participating in postsecondary education by age 23



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

the secondary school level, which negates the necessity of postsecondary enrolment for many pursuing this type of career. In Canada, there is little or no streaming at the elementary or secondary level in most provinces, although students have significant freedom in course selection. Furthermore, most job-oriented vocational training is done in the college system.

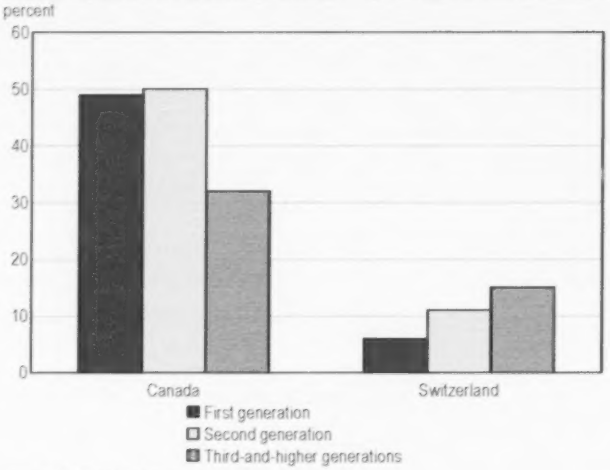
In Canada, students of the first generation were 12 percentage points more likely to attend a postsecondary institution by age 23 than students of the third-and higher generations (i.e., those with Canadian-born parents); students of the second generation—those born in Canada to immigrant parents—were about 18 percentage points more likely to do so (Chart 1).

Several factors accounted for these differences. The most significant was the difference in aspirations regarding postsecondary attendance, as immigrant families were more likely to expect their children to obtain a postsecondary education than families with Canadian-born parents. In addition, students with immigrant backgrounds were more likely to have parents with postsecondary credentials—a factor positively associated with children's postsecondary attendance—and were more likely to live in one of Canada's three largest metropolitan areas (Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal), where rates of university participation are high. Such characteristics accounted for about half of the difference in postsecondary participation rates between immigrant and non-immigrant youth. Secondary school performance, as reflected in PISA reading scores at age 15, accounted for little of the difference. Compared to those students of the third-and-higher generations, PISA scores were marginally lower among students in the first generation and about the same among students in the second generation.

The story for Switzerland was very different. There was an 18-percentage-point gap in post-secondary participation rates between the first and third generations, and a 9-percentage-point gap between the second and third generations. In both cases, secondary school performance appeared to be the main determinant, accounting for virtually all of the difference. First- and second-generation students in Switzerland had much lower PISA reading scores (404 and 452, respectively) than did third-and-higher-generation students (517). These differences reflected, in part, low levels of educational attainment among immigrant parents.

The aggregate postsecondary participation rates presented in Chart 1 conceal considerable variation across immigrant source countries and regions. In Canada, about 44% of youth with immigrant backgrounds in 2000 were of Asian origin, notably Chinese and Indian. Some 70% to 80% of these individuals went on to postsecondary education—rates that were higher by 19 percentage points to 28 percentage points than that among third-and-higher-generation students. About one-fifth of immigrant students came from, or had parents who came from, the United States, the United Kingdom, or Northern or Western Europe; their rates of postsecondary participation were not much different from those of third-and-higher-generation students.

Chart 2
Percent of low-performing 15-year-old students participating in postsecondary education by age 23



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

In Switzerland, about 10% of students with immigrant backgrounds came from, or had parents who came from, Germany/Austria or France/Belgium. Rates of postsecondary education among these students were **higher** by 17 percentage points to 27 percentage points than those of students with Swiss-born parents. Rates of postsecondary participation were lower among students from all other backgrounds; some differences were substantial. For example, among students with immigrant backgrounds from the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Kosovo, or Turkey, rates of postsecondary participation were **lower** by 16 percentage points to 24 percentage points than that among their counterparts with Swiss-born parents.

It is of interest to know whether students who performed poorly in secondary school had realistic prospects of continuing on to postsecondary, or whether poor performance essentially shut down that avenue. And does this differ between students with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds? PISA results at age 15 offer an opportunity to examine these issues. Poor-performing students are identified as those with PISA reading scores below 480—a criterion commonly used in OECD PISA studies.

In Canada, students with immigrant backgrounds who performed poorly in secondary school were much **more** likely to continue to the postsecondary level than their counterparts of the third-and-higher generations. Indeed, about one-half of poor performers in the first and second generations continued on to postsecondary, mostly to university, in spite of their low scores, compared with one-third of poor performers in the third-and-higher generations. About 40% to 50% of the gap between these groups can be explained by differences in family and individual characteristics, mostly student and parental educational aspirations, geographical location, and time spent on homework. In Switzerland, students of the first-generation

who performed poorly in secondary school were less than half as likely to go on to postsecondary than their counterparts in the third-and-higher generations.

Summary

In Canada, students with immigrant parents, including both the first and second generations, had much higher rates of postsecondary participation than their counterparts with Canadian-born parents. In Switzerland, the opposite was the case. In Canada, the educational attainment of immigrants exceeds that of the native-born population by quite a wide margin. Although differences in parental educational do not directly explain much of the gap in children's outcomes, the difference likely works through other variables, such as parental aspirations for their children.

Until recently, Switzerland has generally received lower-skilled immigrants from less developed nations. Consequently, immigrant parents in Switzerland generally have much lower educational levels than Swiss-born parents. The differences in family backgrounds work to some extent through students' early skill development as reflected in PISA reading scores at age 15. Indeed, the postsecondary-participation gap between students with immigrant parents and students with Swiss-born parents was due almost entirely to lower secondary school performance, and at least half of this lower performance was attributable to socioeconomic background.

References

This article in the *Economic Insights* series is based on research carried out by the Social Analysis Division of Statistics Canada. For more information see:

Picot, G., and F. Hou. *Immigrant Status, Early Skill Development, and Postsecondary Participation: A Comparison of Switzerland and Canada*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11F0019M. Ottawa, Ontario. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. No. 344.